

OPINION

Turning the COVID-19 mountain into a mole: What a carnival game can teach us about pandemic response

**ANDRÉ PICARD** >

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When thinking about how we can contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, it would be instructive – if perhaps odd – to think of the fight as an endless carnival game where the only way to stop the rapidly and randomly emerging threats is with a quick strike of a mallet.

Renowned science journalist Ed Yong was the first to use that apt arcade metaphor in the pandemic's early days. "We are in for this long, protracted game of whack-a-mole with the virus, where different places will stamp it out at different times. It will surge back. It will need to be controlled again," he said on NPR's *Fresh Air*.

Mr. Yong's prophetic scenario is now playing out around the world. Countries that bragged about taming the outbreak are now being humbled by the coronavirus's rebound. The same phenomenon is being seen in Canada, too; after bringing their new-case numbers down to almost zero, B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan are seeing them spike again.

Six months, 16.5 million cases and 650,000 deaths into the devastating pandemic, the world has learned many lessons. One of the most important ones: when introducing public-health measures such as lockdowns, physical distancing and mask wearing, you have to hit hard and fast.

Nobody wins at whack-a-mole by being slow and meandering, even if, when you whack furiously, some of the mallet blows cause collateral damage.

The other essential lesson is that when governments ease off containment measures, the virus exploits the opportunity. If restrictions are loosened too much, or too soon, a rebound will occur.

Australia, for instance, held off the coronavirus for months, becoming an early poster child for what a smart response looked like. But on Monday, the country recorded its highest number of coronavirus cases in a day, despite having imposed another massive lockdown early this month to try to rein in the surge.

Japan also acted swiftly, using a strategy of vigorous contact tracing to limit spread. But when it reopened bars and nightclubs in June, contact tracing couldn't keep up. After all, in bars, infected people can interact, directly or indirectly, with hundreds or even thousands of people over the course of one evening.

Vietnam, a country that was declared coronavirus-free after 100 days without local transmission, just recorded its first such case in Da Nang, a popular tourist destination.

Meanwhile, Spain – which had one of the deadliest COVID-19 rates in the world – did a remarkable job of getting its outbreak under control, but it too has seen flare-ups, some of them significant.

We need to bear in mind that the global pandemic is being driven by three countries: the U.S., Brazil and India. Between them, they account for more than half of new cases in the world.

But the scattered outbreaks – these rebounds – are concerning because of the cautionary tales they represent. Any country, if its people and government get a bit too complacent, could potentially become the next hot spot.

One of the big advantages that the virus has is time. Unlike whack-a-mole, with its two-minute time limit, the coronavirus is going to keep coming for the foreseeable future, for months if not years – or at least until there is an effective vaccine.

A continued state of cautiousness is difficult to maintain. We can't stay locked down forever. We can't keep kids out of school indefinitely. We can't flawlessly maintain our bubbles.

There are going to be more flare-ups. They're going to happen in countries, cities and towns that are convinced they are coronavirus-free. They're going to happen when people who thought they were at low risk get infected. This wily virus will continue to fool and frustrate us, and hope we let our guard down.

Pandemic fatigue is real. As cases surge, fall and rebound, we all risk suffering from emotional and economic whiplash. But as eager as we might be to travel again, to hit the clubs, get back to the office or get kids back to school, we have to keep our eye on the long game.

Having "new moles" pop up is inevitable as we loosen restrictions. But the mallet we need comes in the form of sound public policies – mandatory mask laws, limits on gathering sizes, quick testing and tracing.

We need to be vigilant to ensure the surprises are kept to a minimum and, when new outbreaks occur, we can whack them quickly and effectively.

When it comes to coronavirus, whack-a-mole is not just a game. It's a survival strategy.

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher